

# THE *Final Straw*

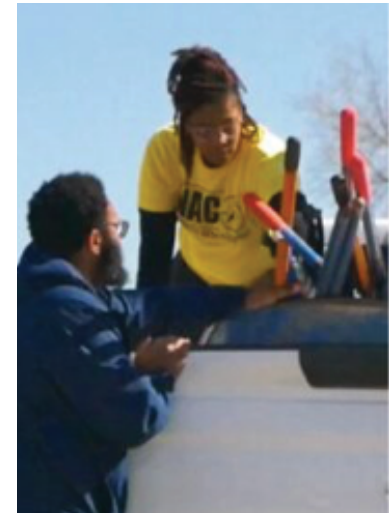
A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC). We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humors) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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## ELEMENTS OF MUTUAL AID



**THE FINAL STRAW RADIO - APRIL 2023**

cooperative as well, it's owned by the filmmakers and run by them. Water Bear is a platform that's free that allows a wide range of social justice and environmental projects on their platform as well. So, we are hoping to get on some platforms, we hope that people don't listen to this and they're like, "Oh shit, these guys are on like a platform, that means they sold out!" We're not going to be selling the movie to get on these platforms. I want to make that distinction clear. We're not going to sell out in that way. But we do want to get on some platforms that have non-exclusive agreements for us to be able to get to a wider audience as well. But the main staple is going to be actually screening in person with people.

**TFSR:** *Not to keep you on too much longer. I really miss 'Trouble.' Our local ABC chapter, used to do showings monthly (or whenever the episodes was released) and discussed it with folks. Well, that's like pre pandemic and much more accessible for folks, or maybe just people not thinking as hard about accessibility and immune compromised circumstances. But still, I miss being able to sit around with a bunch of people and watch a thing and discuss it with them afterwards. So I'm looking forward to this series coming out.*

Well, thank you so much for your thoughtful answers and all the work that you're putting in. Yeah, I really appreciate it. I'm looking forward to seeing more from y'all.

**PAYTON:** Likewise, we really appreciate you and the work that everyone at The Final Straw has been doing for years. I know it's really helped me progress in my political path. Just to hear the range of artists and thinkers and activists that are appearing on the show. So, I just really want to send you an immense amount of love for hosting us.

**LEAH:** Yeah. Thank you for all your work. Also, one other thing about end credits, since y'all are doing this work and making this contribution to the film, if y'all are interested in having The Final Straw in our end credits, you don't have to make a donation. This is your donation. We'll put you in there if you want to be in there.

**TFSR:** *That's very kind. Absolutely. Yeah, I'll make an executive decision. Cool. Thanks a lot.*

gotten total confirmation from, so I'm not going to say their names yet. But we're really excited to see groups coming together to support us.

Firestorm is an operation that we've watched and have supported for a really long time. So we're really happy to be able to see this exchange and directory forming of projects that support this type of media. It doesn't just have to be groups like Firestorm that are bookstores, small mutual aid collectives that also want to see this come together can pool their resources together and donate under their banners and receive this as well. We really want to be able to uplift the voices and the projects that are happening of people that are doing this type of work, but also want to see it come to fruition.

**TFSR:** *Yeah, that's great. We're a few steps away from the actual, "How do we get a public screening?!" Which is too bad, because I know that the anarchist bookfair is still being planned for this year here. But maybe by this time next year, things might be in a place where you'll be able to talk about doing a tour with it!*

**LEAH:** We'll definitely be in touch. We're definitely planning a screening tour once it's released. A lot of the communities that we filmed in and also a lot of people have reached out and been like, "Can you come screen it?: Like, "Yeah, let's talk in like 2025!" [Laughs] We've got a ways to go.

**PAYTON:** End of '24, we'll have a better idea of when the film is actually going to be released. A number of people have already reached out to us saying that they want to do screenings, which is really exciting. We're building our list. I think I had mentioned earlier that I'm really excited about screening in high schools. So if there's any youth camps, or high schools, or things like this where we can get this exposed to youth community centers where it's not just activists but wider audiences. We're really excited about that too. Then obviously, our anarchists community. We really want to showcase those too, and then the communities like Leah said, that we've already filmed in.

This is an alternative pathway of screening and distributing than just going the traditional Film Festival route hoping that you're going to be able to sell your projects to a producer or a platform like Netflix.

We are hoping to get onto a few platforms, The Means TV is a platform that has like leftist content on it. It's a worker owned cooperative. They run a pretty interesting operation. New Day Films is a worker owned

We're happy to share this chat with Leah and Payton, directors of the upcoming documentary series "The Elements of Mutual Aid". You can find previews of the film on their social media and links to those below. The series is about to enter post-production once they've gotten JUST a little more footage to add to their 5 years of work. For the hour, we talk about the series, their concepts of mutual aid, the process of radically respectful film making and some of their inspirations.

Fundraiser: [seedandspark.com/fund/elements-of-mutual-aid#story](https://seedandspark.com/fund/elements-of-mutual-aid#story)

Website: [theelementsofmutualaid.com/](https://theelementsofmutualaid.com/)

Mastodon: [@Elements\\_of\\_MA](https://kolektiva.social/@Elements_of_MA)

YouTube: [youtube.com/channel/UCJsVukfZB-L\\_mM4-MsU7cAQ](https://youtube.com/channel/UCJsVukfZB-L_mM4-MsU7cAQ)

PeerTube: [/kolektiva.media/c/elementsofmutualaid/videos?s=1](https://kolektiva.media/c/elementsofmutualaid/videos?s=1)

**TFSR:** *Would you please introduce yourselves with whatever names, preferred pronouns, affiliations, or other information that makes sense for this interview?*

**LEAH:** My name is Leah, I have they/them pronouns, and I'm helping co-direct The Elements of Mutual Aid docu-series that we're about to be talking about.

**PAYTON:** I'm Payton. I use he and they pronouns, also a co-director of The Elements of Mutual Aid.

**TFSR:** *Can you talk about The Elements of Mutual Aid? Like the scope of the project, what it's covering, how many episodes, all the basics that you got?*

**LEAH:** Yeah, the basic rundown is it is a four-part documentary series. We've been working on the idea of it since about 2018. The four parts of the series are four different chapters that are themed by the different natural elements. We found that there was a lot to talk about in regards to mutual aid. So the themes of the elements help us explore some different aspects of it.

The first chapter is fire and it talks about the origins of mutual aid. It talks about it as this force of light that we carry in each other, and that we can help ignite in each other. We also have to protect it from being squelched, and co-opted by other forces. The Earth Chapter is the second chapter and it talks about the structures of mutual aid, it explores some of the different material projects. The ways that communities are materially meeting their community's needs. It is like a showcase of some of the things that we can do when we let mutual aid be a core value of the work that we're doing. Water is a chapter about healing from systems of oppression that have created these dams within ourselves and between each other to prevent that mutuality that can otherwise come really naturally to us. The projects that we're featuring there are exploring ways to deconstruct those dams through healing, collectively... Instead of self help modes of healing, they're doing collective communal healing, and also protecting their communities. The fourth chapter, Air is about the logistics of this work. So the nuts and bolts of how we make decisions collectively, how we resource our projects, and what those types of discussions can look like within groups, different benefits and downfalls of having nonprofit status and using that as a tool. Things like that.

Across each of the four chapters, we're interviewing about three groups per chapter. So it's about a dozen plus groups that we've been

So there's that we're really interested in BIPOC musicians and artists that want to collaborate on this project with us.

What else is there for people to tap into?

**PAYTON:** I think that's basically it. I mean, we're offering people to be beta screeners, which is something that Leah had mentioned earlier. We're really excited for our final draft of the film to be viewed by people to make sure that it's legible, to make sure that it makes sense, and that it also hits the points that it needs to hit, and that we're not missing critical elements. That doesn't mean we're missing a group that you think would be cool. But does this actually make sense along anti-authoritarian, non-ableist accessibility? Thinking about disability justice, and what colors, fonts, speed and all of these kinds of things. Does this actually make sense? Does it fit within our values? Is it watchable? Can you hear it? Does the music ever peak in away? All of these kinds of things. We really want to be able to offer that space and time to our community, to review it, and then let us know that it does, in fact, make sense or we do need to make some adjustments where we do need to. That'll be like the largest component. We're going to be offering those to people that we respect and care about and are interested in.

**LEAH:** Lastly, just to plug some things on the fundraiser, we designed a t shirt alongside Andrea Narno with Just Seeds. She's the Just Seeds artist. It's an 'Autonomous Communities Are Beautiful' ACAB shirt that we love a lot. We also have an option for radical businesses and collectives and efforts, if they'd like to be included in our end credits. We're offering like an 'in association' credit tier for those groups that is sliding scale. Instead of having producers, or gatekeepers, and individual benefactors being listed in our end credits of people that have more access to capital, we wanted to make our end credits more of a directory of radical projects that people can see are supporting the creation of this type of media. So if you know of any groups or collectives that might be interested in that, reach out to them or reach out to us. Any questions that people have, or other ideas, if they want to chat, send us an email or a message on one of our socials. We'd love to get in touch with more people.

**PAYTON:** Yeah, for instance, it doesn't have to be a formal organization or a cooperative. I do want to give a really big thanks and shout out to Firestorm Books for being one of our first associate production partners in this film. They are standing behind us, as well as a few other projects that we haven't

there's really no solution and the world is run by greedy people and the best you can do is just fit into it." There's a lot of films like that are coming out right now that are picking out social justice language, and then throwing it away into this opulence and nihilism. Nihilism, meaning there's no other way to go about it and we're all screwed.

Being able to challenge those narratives with radical filmmaking and other forms of media production and then screening and hosting and creating place-making. These are things that we're really excited about, we're really proud to be connected to the Radical Film Network, which is a network of international documentary, narrative filmmakers, festivals, production studios, and film enthusiast that are working collectively to push more anti-authoritarian film across the world. So there's a lot of other examples. We really are excited to be a part of this community, learning from this community, and encourage more people who are listening to be a part of this as well.

**TFSR:** *How can listeners, check out some of the footage that you've already released? If people have skills and want to share in translation, or animation, or if they've got projects locally that they're involved with or around that they want to talk to you about, how can people keep up? And how can people help to get you through the last phase of this fundraising?*

**LEAH:** We'll get a link to our fundraiser in the show notes. That's [tinyurl.com/elementsfund](http://tinyurl.com/elementsfund) if you just want to type it out. So you can see a little teaser of our work and our pitch video explaining what we're going to do with the money and why we need it. Our fundraiser has some more details about what that is going to look like. It also has links to our social media. We have an Instagram that we keep up with, a Mastodon account, YouTube, and PeerTube accounts. Our YouTube has some other teasers that we've put together about four or five of them. People can just go and check those out. Sometimes we re-watch them and tear up because they're just really precious.

Other ways that people can support... We've talked earlier about people sending and recording footage consensually of the projects that they're in, reach out to us about that. We're also really interested in hearing from both animators and musicians that might be interested in collaborating with us to have their work part of the film. We're going to be looking specifically for some grant funding or bigger funding to be able to pay an illustrator to do some animation work because that is a very full time effort.

interviewing. We have a couple more to interview this summer. Each of those groups will help highlight different aspects of those themes.

**TFSR:** *I saw the video that y'all had released already, which is really pretty and there's so much in there! When I saw the listing of the different themes of the episodes, the first way that my brain thought to conceive of it was (not just a kick back to really good funk music) but when we talk about mutual aid, oftentimes the vernacular (when it's not coming from cops, and their use of the term) and common usage these days is the shorthand of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief. So I thought, "Okay, so tornadoes, forest fires, earthquakes," thinking in terms that those are the kinds of emergencies that we're reacting to. So it's nice to think about the positive connotations of those different elements.*

Because this is for a radio audience, as well as a podcast audience, and people might be tuning in who aren't familiar with the concept of mutual aid, or maybe only in terms of the usage by law enforcement agencies or in terms of disaster relief. Could you speak a little bit about what definition you kind of work with for mutual aid?

**PAYTON:** Absolutely. So when we're talking about mutual aid, like you've mentioned, the police do mutual aid, Mennonite communities do mutual aid. Mutual Aid is a term that's existed for a really long time. A lot of people reference the work of Peter Kropotkin, who was an anarchist philosopher from Russia in the late 1800s. In 1902, he released a book titled Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution, which is a cornerstone of a lot of early classical anarchist thought. But mutual aid as a term that has existed since the 1830s, at least, if not earlier. A lot of the use of that term was by religious communities, fraternal orders, guilds, and other sorts of civic societies that include police benefit associations, or police mutual aid agreements, or mutual insurance companies created by religious organizations to protect their community members from sickness, death, or provide things like burial or birth services within their communities. This is at a time before social welfare existed, this is before any kind of State agencies existed to support marginalized people. So, people came together to create these mutual aid societies.

The Underground Railroad is a great example of a mutual aid society and a mutual aid network. One of the people that we interviewed, Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhard, has a great book called Collective Courage that talks about the history of cooperation within the Black radical tradition and cites the Underground Railroad as a cooperative network, and also a mutual aid network. A lot of the communities that were a part of the

Underground Railroad were mutual aid societies. They used that term. So it's not an explicitly anarchists term and it's not an explicitly cop term, it's not an explicitly anybody term. It's a tool and a tactic and strategy of communal and collective support that anyone can use.

What we like to think, as anarchists, if taken to its logical conclusion, mutual aid, the act of supporting each other in a non hierarchical way, logically leads towards abolition of the nation state, of capitalism, of white supremacy, able-ism, homophobia, transphobia, and the list of all of the different forms of domination that exist in the world. If we follow mutual aid to its conclusion, cop mutual aid doesn't really make sense, right? It's hierarchical, and it is at the same time decentralized and semi-autonomous which, as an anarchist, sounds interesting. But the way that the cops rely on mutual aid is through these rigid, authoritative command structures that are imposing violence upon communities.

A lot of cop mutual aid agreements between their precincts, that they have that are formal contracts that they call mutual aid agreements, really started to pop off in the 1960s and '70s, when they're repressing the social justice movements of the time, and race riots. So it was a consolidation of efforts just like we see today with Cops City, which is a giant mutual aid effort of not just Atlanta police, but international police that are working together to train, accumulate resources, knowledge, databases, and repress social justice movements. So we understand that cop mutual aid is antithetical towards revolutionary mutual aid, as we understand it.

**TFSR:** *You mentioned Kropotkin. He's going to be, for a lot of people, the most common reference of the term is that book. It is not just an anarchist term, it gets used by different people, but the fact that Kropotkin was a major theorist, that was the basis for the construction of Alcoholics Anonymous, for instance, (which is not a method that works for everyone) but as far as creating these decentralized networks, where groups take care of each other, and they also check in with each other for resources, where people can kind of pop in and out from different ones, and you can attend a meeting somewhere else... It's literally mutual aid. People share their experiences, their tools, their time, and their efforts with each other to overcome these addictive problems that they're experiencing. AA is not an anarchist organization, but it's interesting how they were able to take that and put it to that use. But yeah, that's a great answer.*

*So, with that in mind, what do you see this documentary series contributing to people that are engaging, or consider themselves engaging in mutual aid from an anarchistic, autonomous, or anti-capitalist perspective? What*

our shoulders telling us when we need to be somewhere, what we need to film, or what we need to cut.

Everything that we're doing is on our own. That opens up a lot of possibility and it also makes it a lot more precarious. If we don't have enough money in our pockets, then we can't continue. That's why we're doing a fundraiser now, to get us into the editing process and finish the rest of our production. We still have a handful of interviews to do including one with Lorenzo and JoNina Ervin in Chattanooga, Tennessee, that we're very excited about, along with a handful of other really exciting projects that we hope to profile in the film, too. We have a little bit farther to go. Then we have about a year and some change of editing to do before we actually distribute the film.

**TFSR:** *Can you talk a little bit about inspirations and other projects that are out there? And how you came to the spot that you're out with filmmaking? Did you have backgrounds in filmmaking before this? Or is this kind of a new venture for you?*

**PAYTON:** Leah, you were a journalist at one point and I went to film school, but I dropped out after a year. So I can't really say that I like went to film school. I'm a total dropout. So everything that we've been doing has kind of been through watching YouTube videos and talking to other people. One really amazing filmmaker friend that we have, who's another anti authoritarian from Puerto Rico, is Juan Carlos Dávila. We're really excited about his work, the way that he approaches radical filmmaking, and the questions that he's asking about, "What does it mean for us to be able to produce film on our own, with our values, and support each other in an international network of radical filmmakers?" So we're really excited to be in relationship with people like Juan Carlos.

People like Cine Móvil in New York City, who are screaming radical films and thinking really critically about, "What does it mean to build this autonomous infrastructure of popular education, and culture, and art making, and place-making?" That runs in tandem with on the ground, anti authoritarian mutual aid projects, and uplifts projects that are happening locally and internationally, in a way that's really pushing the envelope forward. And not just glorifying the mainstream film that's coming out that has 'radical narratives' like the Black Panther Wakanda Forever media that sort of like tickles revolutionary aesthetics, but then folds really hard down into CIA propaganda, capitalist exploits, and the liberal nihilism of, "Well,

really showcase what communities are up to, in a way that we can't do by ourselves as two people that are making this, with the values that we're making them in, and the amount of time that we're making them in. So if you have footage like that, or are curious about what that might look like to film some of the work that your community is doing, we definitely encourage people to reach out to us.

**PAYTON:** Yeah, we can string together some really awesome montages of the huge variety of projects that are happening, nationally and internationally, too.

**TFSR:** *I wonder if you could talk about funding sources? You mentioned avoiding the independent film festival circuit, you mentioned not pay-walling the content. Can you talk about the crowd sourcing that you're doing? And point to the specific stuff that you're funding for: Animating, subtitling, translating, these sorts of things?*

**PAYTON:** Yeah, that's a great question. In pre-production, when we were getting ready to start filming, we did one fundraiser where Leah designed some really awesome T-shirts. We did a fundraiser to specifically raise enough funds to be able to pay everybody that we're going to be interviewing. So we successfully did that with really big support from our community, which we're incredibly thankful for. A lot of those people have showed back up for the second fundraiser that we're working on now, which is designed for post-production, editing services, translations, and things like this.

Both of us were working jobs and just saved up our own money. We were living in a collective house. So we were able to keep our costs incredibly low, dumpster diving, EBT hustle, liberating goods, all of this sort of thing to be able to get as much support and as low cost as possible to be able to get ready to film. All of our equipment we own, we're not renting any of our equipment, all of the editing is going to be done in house, we're not paying for any outside editing services, we are paying for translations.

The way that we've been getting around the country is through a conversion van that we built specifically for to do this project. So we've been living out of an apartment on wheels, which we really love. It's got solar and a sink and all of that kind of thing. So we poured a lot of time into building out this van. That's allowed us to be able to travel freely around the country on our own schedule. We have no producers that are peering over

*do you see this as specifically bringing opposed to some of the other materials, some of the other interviews and such that have come out over the last few years since the term started gaining more cache culturally? What sort of things are you looking to bring to the cultural dialogue, whether among people who are already doing the work or to people that consider themselves on the outside of it and maybe would want to get involved?*

**LEAH:** Yeah, definitely. One of our main goals in producing this series was to develop a foundation within visual media. Because there's a lot of books and zines that have been written about this as well as podcasts, discussions, and articles, but we really wanted to explore mutual aid through visual medium which could be more accessible to a different range of people and might lead to some different takeaways for people being able to watch and see and witness people talking about what mutual aid meant to them and their understanding of it, than they would if they read a book.

So, in creating this visual media, we really wanted to bring a stronger foundation to an understanding of the depth of mutual aid. Not just as a term, as Payton was talking about, but also as a value for how we engage in each other and to help people understand that mutual aid is rooted deeply in indigenous and Black traditions and legacies of community and care, and something that we can learn from those communities and build alongside.

**PAYTON:** One thing that I'm really excited about with producing a film about mutual aid is getting these ideas out beyond just the anarchist milieu. I think that maybe where I was going earlier, is thinking about how so much content has come out post 2020 and a lot of it is geared towards anarchists/liberal people. People in the so-called left. I have a lot of thoughts about what encompasses the left. It's definitely something that a lot of people who are thinking more progressively around the world are oriented towards.

So, then I think about people like my mom, who is on the conservative end of things and is a Trump supporter. How then can we talk to people in a realistic sense who are not organized fascists, but have conservative belief systems? How do we engage with people that are real people who are afraid and dealing with economic crisis and raising families, and feel alienated and estranged, and feel like they need to find some new way of finding collective support.

A lot of people's first assumption is the nation state, because it's the most obvious one. That's the biggest one. So either reifying, the nation state, reforming the nation state, or folding into whatever currents the

nation state is presenting, a Trump figure, is where a lot of people end up getting folded into. But if we can create these really accessible and palatable solutions and create more dialogue, for example with this film, in particular, I think we have a better shot at creating more cultures of mutual aid. I think Leah was talking about before.

We're not really interested in creating small anarcho pockets where people are wearing all black and know the history of mutual aid, and are able to recite Kropotkin. That's really fun and I really like being in spaces like that, but my mom's never gonna live in a place like that. And I want my mom to not be swayed towards the fascists. I want her to understand that there are alternatives and values that we can implement right now today that we don't need to wait for permission to do.

I really hope that being able to screen this film in high schools, and in real communities, at community centers, as we're like screening this film independently... We won't be going to film festivals or anything like that. We don't want this film getting locked up into the professional industrial film machine. We want it to be out in the streets with people. So we really want to invite people to host us in their communities and to host their own screenings of this film in ways that actually attract people of different value systems that could actually start to move away to fascist creep.

**LEAH:** I'll just add to that. We started working on this documentary series in 2018, as I was saying earlier. The term did get popularized in 2020, more and more in a larger network of mostly leftist and radical people that are looking to do something alongside the George Floyd rebellions. We're calling for abolition and so what does that actually mean and look like? People are really hungry and looking for answers of alternatives to these systems. I think people are extremely aware that these systems are leading us towards death and collapse. We need to have a really radical different vision for what we can offer.

So in 2020, a lot of mutual aid projects started and got initiated. That was a lot of people's first touch point with mutual aid. We really hope in making this series we're showcasing the deep historical traditions of mutual aid through indigenous and Black communities, and also showing that mutual aid work can express itself in a lot of different ways than just moving around boxes of food and getting people resources and creating lists of people with resources and people that need resources. It needs to look, in our opinion, extremely relational. It needs to prioritize relationships, and breaking down the hierarchies that we have between ourselves so that we

invited, is something that we're trying to be really cautious of. It's hard, because that's not always something that you can do perfectly. Sometimes you get invited to something by an organizer, but then the people that are at the event didn't know that you were coming, because the organizer didn't tell them. So we're trying to think a few steps ahead.

We've run into a few times where we're at an event and we're filming and it's marginalized people, and then other people feel uncomfortable that the cameras are there, so then we have to turn them off. That's nobody's fault. We're not trying to pass blame onto other people. It's our responsibility as filmmakers to come in with an informed understanding of where we are, and to be able to make informed decisions about how to protect people's identities and their own security and people's sense of safety in a space with people who are coming in with cameras that they don't know. That's a very vulnerable little thing. So we'll usually introduce ourselves in those moments and do a room temperature check and see if people actually want to be filmed, which obviously is a really hard, in the moment question to answer, which usually means we don't get that footage. And for us, it's okay.

What we want to be able to do is get some funding to be able to do illustrations, because we think that being able to actually illustrate some of these things, would be a lot more interesting and dignified than trying to capture people on film, doing things candidly, in a way that feels extractive. Anecdotes are powerful too. We don't always have to show everything on film all the time. We separate ourselves from the rest of the mainstream documentary world in that way. This isn't reality TV. We're not just like following people around and using people as our subjects, which is a really colonial term. We avoid even using that term, 'the subject.' We talk about our comrades that are our friends that we are filming. Our community members that we are filming, and try to move into a place of rejecting the, "we need to film everything and then ask questions later" approach.

**LEAH:** One other thing I'll add is that we are really encouraging people over the next year/year and a half, while we're editing this to share with us any footage and photos that they've taken consensually of the work that they're doing. Part of our goal in this series is to illustrate visually what this work can look like. The more footage that we have from other people that have their trust built with their community and can have those conversations about, "does this make sense to film?" Even just like landscape format on your phone, or taking some images, and offering them for the series could be a really beautiful way to help us enhance the story that we're telling, and



We've heard a number of horror stories of people being exploited, people that we filmed, who then are sharing their experiences with us of other times that they've been filmed. Who have been told, "Oh, this is just a student project and we're not going to sell the movie." Then sure enough, they sell the film, and then it ends up in film festivals gets picked up, put on Netflix, and they ended up buying a nice home afterwards. None of that money gets kicked back to the people who are actually doing front line organizing. Or, conversely like Leah was just referencing, a big HBO team coming into a native community and just waving cameras around and not asking for consent before showing up into spaces that they assume that they're welcome in.

So we've had a cameras in the bags approach to all of this. We're not a camera forward, we're camera after. We are really trying to think critically about what it means to empower people that we're only spending short periods of time with, both financially, emotionally, and narratively. It's really important for us.

**LEAH:** Yeah. We haven't done it perfectly. I think one of our other values is hearing back from communities that we've gone through, and just hearing what their experience has been. We're committed to receiving that and sharing that. The things that we're learning, which, we started the blog that's on our website. Not sure how many people read that, but that blog has been a way for us to catalog some of the commitments that we're making, our intention, and the things that we're learning. Our hope is that we're really using our experience in making this film as a resource, creating a resource out of this experience for more of this type of media to get created within as well.

**TFSR:** *Leah, with you saying this is a relational thing... That you're not standing aside and separate from, this is you keeping up an end of your relationship with the people that you're engaging with. Which I think is awesome. It must also increase the amount of work and the amount of time to put that kind of intentionality and room for feedback in, is that right? That's probably one of the reasons that it's not a mainstay in documentary making.*

**PAYTON:** Yeah, something that we've repeated throughout the production processes: "If this doesn't feel good, we can't film it." So just rolling up into a community event with our cameras in a place where we haven't been

can be taking care of each other and listening to each other and making consensus together and practicing things like that. I think people are just really curious for answers.

I think organizing together in a mutual way is an extremely hard thing to do. We've both been part of different efforts that sometimes hasn't worked very well. Sometimes it's been taken over by authoritarian communists. It's really discouraging to gather under the banner of some core values, or points of unity of what we care about in the world. Even amongst people that are about similar things, it's still really hard to build consensus. That's extremely complicated and we've been really divorced from those practices.

I really hope that after watching this series that people feel like they know a few more groups that are working on this, and feel like they're in broader community than they even realized with people that are working on these questions, struggling with them, coming up with different tactics. We really need to be in those conversations with each other, to develop alongside each other, and learn from what we're doing, because it doesn't always feel like it works. So as much as we need to prove to the liberals and other people that we can do something really different. If we focus on different values, I think part of it is also proving to ourselves that we can build things, and we know how to sustain them, and we know how to defend them and learn together.

**PAYTON:** Yeah, this project is largely experimental. I really love how you just framed that, Leah. We're hoping to be able to present a series of experiments of mutual aid from the radical anti authoritarian perspective, and reveal the successes and some of the pitfalls of what happens when we experiment so that we can spark more experimentation. This film isn't all encompassing. We're not filming every single type of Mutual Aid project. We've gone into some communities and people are like, "Oh, have you filmed these guys yet?" And we're like, "No, we either didn't know about them, or we didn't get in touch with them, or it didn't work out. We're just two people in a van." We're not creating a comprehensive mutual aid analysis here. We're hoping to present a series of experiments so that we can then continue to experiment together and hopefully more film comes out in this theory of change to spark more conversation like this.

**TFSR:** *That must be exciting to show up and talk to people, and they're like, "Did you know about this one?!" Making this ever expanding list of things that*

*you can't really touch on. You're just like, "That would be dope but I've only got 70 years on this planet."*

**PAYTON:** Exactly. Yeah, we've only got so many \$100 of gas in the tank.

**LEAH:** The other thing is, we really feel some priority to get this piece out as soon as possible so that it's relevant to the conditions that it was filmed in. So that can continue to contribute towards conversations that need to be iterated on again, by other people too. We don't want to spend 10 years on this project even though we very well could. We'd make a much better project that way. We want to get it out quickly. We don't want it to get stuck in film festivals like Payton was saying, because that will pull it out into those spaces for a year or two years. If something's in a film festival, at least for most big film festivals, you can't show it elsewhere. So our aim is to release it for free, not behind paywalls, it'll have Spanish and English subtitling and just trying to get it to as many people as possible.

**TFSR:** *Yeah, that's great. I like the approach. This is an experiment in mutual aid in and of itself and trying to present... Not a model that people have to cookie cut out from but saying, "Here's the approach that we're taking to try to do this. We can't be everywhere all the time." Also, this is not a thing that you said necessarily but, "Maybe we've got biases, maybe somebody else can take this, modify it, apply it to their media making where they're at, see things that we wouldn't be able to see." Just increase the richness of the conversation.*

*One thing I was thinking... Payton, this was sparked by you mentioning your mom. For years, I've seen models of what "the right" does, more reactionary elements within society, how they organize media, or how they organize campaigns, or how they organize mutual aid. I guess it's washing over broad brush thing to say "right wing," but like conservative church communities in rural areas around the country. They, for a long time have done a really good job of pooling resources locally in order to redistribute them among parishioners, for instance, or community members: Soup kitchens, redistribution of clothes, childcare goods, health care services. These are all things that people that generally I would say are on the conservative side of things are doing to help people in their communities survive. People that oftentimes they identify as being in their community based on in-group/out-group identities, sometimes around ethnicity, race, sometimes around language groups, sometimes around faith group, class, all these other lines. In the last five years, I can think of examples where right wing groups like Shieldwall Network in Tennessee,*

in as we show up to places. What does it look like to film here? How do we introduce ourselves? When we do introduce ourselves we're affirming to people that we don't have to use any of the footage that we record, if anybody doesn't want things filmed, that's okay, and if they get filmed, and then they realize that they don't want to be in it later, they can let us know. We'll cut it. If they want to review the footage that they're in, then we'll share that with them.

Then, for interviews, we try to create a space where people can feel really comfortable to say what they need to say and share what they want to share. Sometimes that's difficult to feel comfortable in. There's a lot of trust that gets extended to us to do that within. So, we're giving the people that we're interviewing the control to not include things in the final version that they don't included and an opportunity to review the selections that we do want to use.

We really want people to have the control of what they say and for what they said to translate. So we'll also have a beta screening phase before things get finally released to share with some of the people that we filmed and also other folks whose opinions we'd really like to gather and make some edits out of that as well. But being really consent-based and knowing that we're not like an objective journalist or filmmakers in this. That's a big fallacy, that we can do that. We are active participants in this struggle. This is a mechanism by which we're taking part in struggle. We want to be supportive of the people that we're filming, except for the cops, when we do an interview with the cops, they're not gonna be afforded the same.

**TFSR:** *They're the only people that are being paid to be on film. So you're not paying them. They're getting paid to be in the background.*

**PAYTON:** Yeah, all of our taxpayer money. But actually, that's a great point. Another thing that we are doing is compensating everybody who is appearing in the film. A lot of documentary and journalistic norm is being broken there. You get an unreliable subject, is the argument, but we really throw a lot of that kind of stuff out. We think that being able to offer financial compensation to mostly queer, and racialized BIPOC people for spending their time, not just on film, but getting ready on set, and talking to us afterwards, and doing all of the prep work to answer questions and schedule with us. That's a lot of labor that people are doing. We're able to give individuals like \$100 and groups like about \$200. We hope that if we get more money down the line, we'll be able to kick more down.

*an order to get a thing fucking done to help people, despite whatever political perspectives they had.*

**PAYTON:** I'm really happy that you mentioned that we both were on the mutual aid disaster relief workshop series back in 2018 when this was going on. So we had a lot of questions about the anarchists planes, or how many planes does Mutual Aid Disaster Relief own? Which obviously, we don't.

**TFSR:** *All of them.*

**PAYTON:** Yeah, all the all the planes are Mutual Aid Disaster Relief planes if you think about it. But we were talking a lot about the power of having a clipboard and a badge and enough gumption. We always said that, "our audacity is our capacity." That was a big thing that we were trying to tell people is that you can walk onto the tarmac, you can ask for those resources, and you can make things happen,

**TFSR:** *Bringing it back to the style of film that y'all are making and the precedent of this experiment in film-making. Obviously, you're not the first folks to engage some of these practices, but I'd like for you to talk about the film-making process itself and how you've engaged with the folks that you've engaged with. The subjects you might say? The website describes your practices as being heavily consent driven, trauma informed, and focused on accessibility through not pay walling the output of it and also through like working to get subtitling going for it. I wonder if you could just talk about what your motivations were or what your thoughts were going through that and how those practices have panned out for you?*

**LEAH:** There's so many conversations there. We've talked a lot about this, because the documentary field in and of itself, its origins are deeply colonial. There's a lot of poverty porn that still gets produced and a lot of extractionism for profit. So our intention has been to really investigate those practices of the documentary making field. This is our first documentary. So we're coming to it with somewhat of a clean slate, but there's just a lot to figure out.

Just in terms of like contacting people, being flexible to their schedule, showing up and having cameras in a situation where not everybody knew that we were going to be filming there. We are continually checking

*going down to some of the hurricane ravaged areas in the southeast, specifically only offering aid to white folks, and then documenting that, or you've got Proud Boys and other reactionary ethno-nationalist groups showing up in Ohio in response to the East Palestine tragedy.*

*I wonder if you have something to say about this? Like tools are tools no matter whose hands they're in and to reiterate the values that you're also trying to bring along. You mentioned anti-authoritarian mutual aid methods that are meant to inculcate these sort of values or like expressing.*

**PAYTON:** Yeah, I'm really happy that you mentioned those different examples of fascist groups mobilizing around the term mutual aid as well. I was doing some looking into this, because I'm in the middle of researching the earliest examples that I can possibly find of police mutual aid agreements... Like when did those start? I can absolutely say that police have had mutual aid benefit societies pre-Kropotkin. So pre 1902. The earliest Mutual Aid Society among the police that I can find is like 1873, in Springfield, Massachusetts. I have to imagine that there's others. But I'm specifically looking for the use of the term 'Mutual Aid.' And that's the earliest that I can find.

It's really interesting to see this trajectory of mutual aid as a relatively a-political practice that can become and has been politicized through a lot of different types of politics, from fascist to anarchist.

Thinking about how other groups are using mutual aid is a really interesting prospect. We want to interview police, we are kind of looking for Midwestern or New England police in a small municipality. So we can get that small town. I really like the accent of the New England or Midwestern police, just kind of get that caricature of a cop and talking really seriously about how they use mutual aid to kind of shake people who haven't realized that it's not just us. These guys do it too. It's a lot easier to get into a police municipality than it would be to follow along with the fucking Proud Boys. I couldn't do that. No way [laughs].

So being able to depict the different facets of mutual aid is something that we hope to be able to do in a very small sense in this film. It's not something that we're really focusing on. I've said a few times, and we've had internal debates about whether or not we should do this, filming like a Mennonite community, for instance, because they have mutual aid traditions that date back hundreds of years as well. But we don't want to get too far outside the realm of what we're talking about with regards to specifically anti-authoritarian mutual aid. So we'll have some anecdotes about other

mutual aid examples, and we're gonna have narrator's that are speaking over the film, who are giving more of that context. We're really focusing on the groups that were that we are in solidarity with.

I do think that a film could come out that is specifically about different mutual aid traditions among fascists. With the Ted Bundy stand-off, for instance, in Nevada. There was multiple mutual aid groups that self identified as mutual aid and this was years and years and years ago.

So this isn't a new concept for like fascists to start using and mobilizing around the term mutual aid. I've seen a lot of like Instagram posts about like, "Oh, the Fascists are co-opting mutual aid!" Which I actually don't think is historical. I think that's a pretty a-historical take, unfortunately. I think that that's something that I'd like to challenge. Fascists have been using this term for a really long time. This isn't a new thing, like you said, churches have been using mutual aid. I'm not calling churches, fascists, some of them are, but church communities are coming together and supporting each other, and do a really good job of being able to provide.

This is why the Black Church is so impactful in Black communities, especially in the south. Material support to community members on a free association basis. Obviously, that comes along with a lot of like hierarchical caveats, homophobia can be rampant, and things like this, more capitalistic mentalities can arise in those communities, if unchecked. So it's not perfect, but I do think that, like you were saying, it's a tool and utilized by people with a revolutionary analysis, mutual aid can become a real force of abolition.

**LEAH:** I think it's been really fun, in some ways, to pitch this project to so many different people as we've been working on it and hear the reactions. You can really pitch it in ways that pretty much anybody can agree with and be like, "That sounds awesome!" I'm like, "I know you're a conservative who listens to really ridiculous media." The concept itself of, "Let's help each other. We don't need the government and these punitive structures to be facilitating so much of society." We really have a lot of capacity to do that and that really takes us taking responsibility to take care of each other.

The premise of mutual aid is really accessible. Our task has really felt like to stretch it into different areas that other people aren't necessarily thinking about. We didn't really want to profile a whole bunch of food distribution efforts, because that's the main touch-point that a lot of people have for this work. If we did profile a food distribution, it was migrants who are organizing in Tijuana doing a food kitchen there. But otherwise, we

really looked out for different groups that speak to really creative ways that mutual aid manifests and shows itself alongside other radical, de-colonial, anti-racist, carrying values for a much more radical world.

That looked like people in LA with Reclaim Our Homes that we interviewed, occupying homes that the State owns and a huge network of support backing them up and providing 24 hour defense from the cops showing up. It's looked like disaster relief stuff, but also younger, BIPOC kids in San Antonio, with Yanawana Herbolarios, learning medical skills, action camp skills, and disaster response skills, so that they can then go teach their communities in different iterations about those things. It's looked like harm reduction, obviously. It's looked like art. We've interviewed artists with Just Seeds [Collective] about the work that they're doing to collectively support each other to distribute messaging around being human with each other. Which is really gravely needed when a lot of our television and media, especially around apocalypse and crisis has to do with prepper-ism, or people just being awful to each other. We really need to strengthen and build our imaginary around capacity for care.

So yeah, we really tried to exercise around how we can take this term and listen to a lot of different voices that are applying it in really beautiful ways, into food sovereignty, into just so many different areas of the work that they're doing. To build a much more radical, just world.

**TFSR:** *Back in 2018. In response to Hurricane Florence, some comrades from around here went out to the coast, to the Lumberton area to do disaster relief. One of the stories that some of them came back with... A couple of them were medical professionals that were involved in going out and volunteering, the floods had cut off some of the land base from the rest of the state. These are historically racialized and marginalized communities. Lots of like Lumbee native folks, lots of Black folks live out there, some of the poorest counties in North Carolina. And from the other side of the floodwaters, they were able to coordinate, anarchists mostly, were able to coordinate with some white, libertarians conservative who owned a plane. They were able to talk someone in the military into allowing them to get into the airspace to fly over this disaster zone when nobody was allowed to go and to let them use the runways to be able to load up all this equipment, food, and safety supplies onto this airplane because the government was waiting for the floodwaters to recede before giving people any sort of support over there. It's an example of people seeing the humanity and each other and deciding to bend the existing rules and use whatever access they have*